Russia's post-Soviet transition has made current many issues of the late imperial era. The long nineteenth century now speaks directly to the present and parallels between the late Tsarist and post-Soviet periods abound despite the obvious differences. One of the most provocative questions to reemerge is post-Soviet liberalism's viability as an alternative to the new "directed democracy" incarnation of statism, which the Putin-Medvedev governments have sold as the guarantee of social stability and economic growth. The majority of the Russian population has supported this conservative backlash because the liberal market reformers of the 1990s misjudged the effects of rapid economic modernization. They uncritically followed the Western libertarian model that had reemerged in the late twentieth century as a conservative agenda in its classical laissez-faire sense (under Reagan and Thatcher). As a result of the mismanaged post-Soviet economic reforms, in the minds of most Russians today liberalism has become synonymous with political chaos, rampant corruption, reckless socio-economic experimentation, and rapacious capitalism.

None of this was true about Russia’s pre-revolutionary liberals who deserve a closer examination, which will surely enrich the current debate by exploring the nuances of the country's previous socio-economic transformations. The word “liberal” has become a term of abuse in Russia, which is precisely why historians must re-examine its nineteenth-century connotations. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn mentions in the foreword to the original Russian translation of the book under review, Leontovitsch's achievement was first to distinguish “between liberalism and radicalism” and second to present “possible corruptions of liberalism that [...] lead to democratic absolutism and imperialist democracy” (vii). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the second point possesses particular political and intellectual currency. That this is the sixth incarnation of Leontovitsch’s work testifies to its vitality—the original appeared in German in 1957 and appeared in a second edition in 1974, followed by the YMCA translation into Russian in 1980, a French edition in 1986, and the “Russkii put’” edition of 1995.

Leontovitsch was not trained as an historian initially. Born in St. Petersburg in 1902, he attended school in Kiev until the revolution and civil war drove him to follow his parents into emigration in Prague by 1921. Leontovitsch continued his studies in law between 1924 and 1932 at the Russian Free University (Prague) and completed his postgraduate studies in constitutional law. He also researched canon law at the St. Sergius Russian Orthodox Theological Seminary in Paris. Between 1934 and 1945, he lectured on Soviet Law at the Institute for International Law, a part of the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, and International Civic Law at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. He also taught Russian language courses at the Higher Institute for Economics. During this time he published a series of articles in respected journals on the philosophy of law and constitutional law in Europe and the USSR. He turned his attention to history after the collapse of Nazi Germany when he moved to Munster and then Frankfurt. He received a doctorate in history in 1947 from Frankfurt and stayed on as lecturer and then professor of Byzantine and East European history. He left Frankfurt University in 1953 and moved to London with his family to research the magnum opus under review, which Vittorio Klostermann published in Frankfurt in 1957 with support from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research under Max Horkheimer.
Written from the legal perspective, Leontovitsch's book has always acted as a corrective to social and political interpretations of Russian liberalism. By the time that academics became interested in Russian liberalism history in the 1950s, their treatment of it became a hostage of Cold War ideology. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rush to resurrect liberal ideals to accommodate the Yeltsin-era “liberal” governments in Russia also skewed perceptions of the pre-revolutionary original. Slowly post-Soviet historiography has shed itself of libertarian ideologies and deepened its analysis with professional historians taking the helm. As a result, however, the analysis has stopped attracting wide public attention and has descended into specialized and obscure academic publications. It is therefore refreshing to see one of the original and eminently readable works about Russian liberalism finally translated into English, which will make it available to undergraduates in English-speaking universities.

Leontovitsch's work was not the very first post-war history about Russian liberalism. In his 1951 article “The Constitutional Democrats and the Russian Liberal Tradition,” Donald Treadgold already argued that traditionally Russian liberals focused less on individual freedom and administrative non-intervention, but rather considered the state to be the only civilizing agent in Russia. Viktor Leontovitsch's *Geschichte des Liberalismus in Russland* (1957) became an early milestone in the field with its refreshing focus on how the presence or absence of legal norms of civic liberty and property ownership conditioned the political, ideological, and economic developments from the time of Catherine II to the imperial Duma period. Leontovitsch defines liberalism's two core principles as protecting “individual initiative and enterprise as the ultimate foundation of society” on the one hand, and on the other ensuring “the security and inviolability of private property vis-à-vis the state, because it sees that the unhindered possession of goods by individuals is the most effective guarantee that the individual should be able to pursue his aims and develop his potential without hindrance” (3).

As if to remind his readers that Russia had a liberal tradition, Leontovitsch essentially combs through all the Russian rulers from Empress Catherine II until the last Tsar Nicholas II in order to identify these undeveloped seeds of social spontaneity, property law, and constitutionalism. The book is divided into three sections: “The History of Liberalism, 1762-1855,” “The Development of Civil Liberty, 1856-1914,” and “The Development of Political Liberty, 1856-1914.”

Leontovitsch praises the consistent strengthening of the institution of private property, encouragement of economic independence, and expansion of the rights of the towns under Catherine the Great and asserts that she “resolutely rejected any regulation. ‘Nothing is more dangerous than drawing up regulations for everything,’ the empress stresses. Which spheres of economic activity develop and where they develop depend on the needs of the population—indeed, must be based exclusively on them. One should not fear the excessive development of individual industries” (18). Catherine's work would live on in Mikhail Speransky's attempts to “consolidate civil society” by “putting the state on a firm constitutional basis” (39). Leontovitsch even includes Nikolai Karamzin in the liberal line-up—even the “Iron Tsar” and the “gendarme of Europe” Nicholas I receives credit for consolidating the gains made under Catherine II and Alexander I, most